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The South Pacific: Growing Antinuclear Attitudes and US Security Interests

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An Intelligence Memorandum

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An Intelligence Memorandum

*Information available as of 24 May 1982
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted]
[redacted] of the Office of East Asian Analysis.
Comments and queries are welcome and may be
addressed to the Chief, Southeast Asia Division,
OEA, [redacted]

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This memorandum has been coordinated with the
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**The South Pacific: Growing
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Summary

Recent bans on port calls by US warships, plus revival of the idea of a nuclear-weapons-free zone, could presage restrictions on internationally recognized rights of free passage of ships and aircraft over the open seas.¹ Such restrictions would impede movement of US warships in the vital sea lanes between the United States and Australia and New Zealand.

Efforts to counter islander concerns over nuclear contamination are complicated by their inclination to tar all nuclear activity—ship propulsion, weaponry, and disposal—with the opprobrium they attach to French nuclear testing in the region. The proud and newly independent island states are skeptical of both US assurances about the safety of nuclear-powered ships and the US policy of refusing to disclose whether warships are nuclear armed.

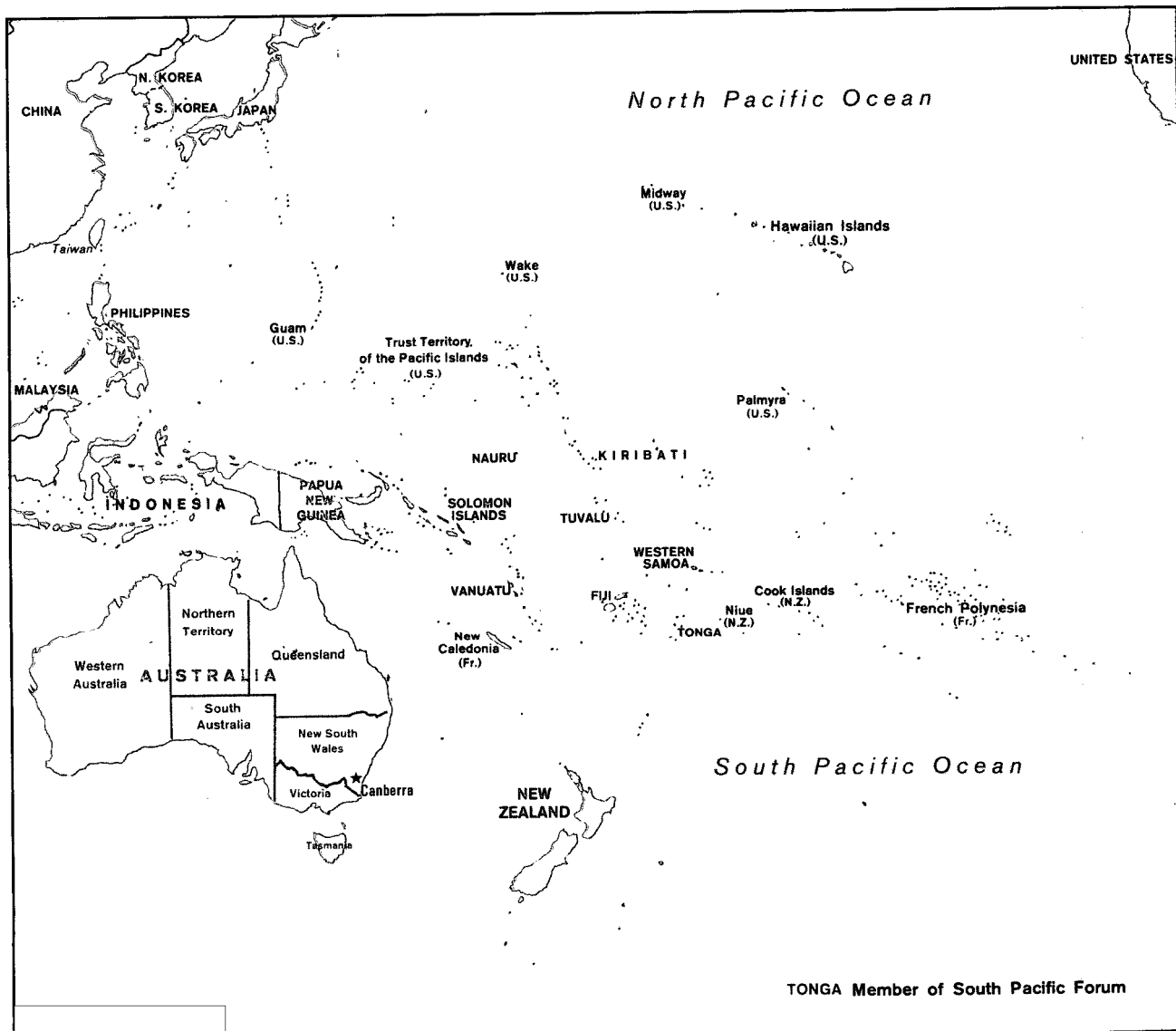
Unanimity among the island states on the whole range of nuclear issues is unlikely. Moreover, the strong pro-West and anti-Soviet orientation of the South Pacific states provides some hedge against precipitate actions. But over the longer term growing antinuclear sentiment could erode the ability of the United States to carry out its security commitments in the region.

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¹ The island nations have declared 200-mile exclusive economic zones from which they hope to earn foreign exchange by licensing foreign fishing. These overlapping zones form a band across the South Pacific. Should the idea of a nuclear-free South Pacific be adopted, the islands could extend to these already defined zones prohibitions on nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed vessels.

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**The South Pacific: Growing
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Background

Antinuclear sentiment in the South Pacific dates back to US atomic tests in the Pacific in the 1940s and 1950s. Subsequent French tests in French Polynesia have kept the issue alive, even though these tests have been conducted underground since 1975. The idea of a nuclear-free South Pacific, in which all nuclear activity would be banned, was promoted by the New Zealand Labor government in office from 1972 to 1975. The Muldoon government scrapped the notion of a nuclear-free zone as "woolly headed," and until recently the concerns of the island nations have been focused on the issues of nuclear testing and disposal of nuclear wastes.

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**New Factors
at Play**

Recent events have rekindled antinuclear sentiment. In late 1981, press reports of cracking and subsidence at Mururoa Atoll, the French test site, aroused islander fears of leakage of radioactive materials. Although the reports were not publicly confirmed, subsequent French reactivation of a nearby test site added to suspicions that something was amiss at Mururoa. Early this year, word that the US Navy was conducting an environmental impact study on the disposal of spent reactors from nuclear submarines in Pacific waters nettled the islanders. Antidumping sentiment had already been aroused by renewed attention to a standing Japanese plan to dispose of low-grade radioactive waste in North Pacific waters several hundred miles off Japan. We believe the growing antinuclear movement in the United States and Western Europe has also stimulated similar feelings in the South Pacific.

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The latest upsurge of antinuclear sentiment has taken a new direction by focusing on nuclear armament and nuclear propulsion issues. This makes the United States the obvious target because of its longstanding policy of not disclosing whether its warships are nuclear armed and the fact that the US Navy is increasingly nuclear powered.

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Vanuatu set the stage for the new round of concern last February when it withdrew an invitation to two conventionally powered US naval vessels out of pique over the US nondisclosure position. Vanuatu is a maverick among the conservative South Pacific states in its attraction to Third World radical views, and its switch on port visits at first seemed only another incident of aberrant behavior.

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Table 1**Background Data on Selected
South Pacific Island Countries**

	Date of Independence	Population (thousands)	Policy on Port Visits
Papua New Guinea	1975	3,200	Permits
Fiji	1970	650	Bans
Western Samoa	1962	160	Permits
Tonga	1970	100	Permits
Solomons	1978	233	Permits
Vanuatu	1980	120	Bans
Tuvalu	1978	7	Permits ^a
Kiribati	1979	58	Permits ^a
Nauru	1968	7	Unknown

^a US warship made a port call when the country became independent, but there has been no occasion for visits since then.

[REDACTED]

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Ratu Mara, Prime Minister of neighboring Fiji and elder statesman of the South Pacific, a few weeks later announced a parallel ban on US warships from Fijian ports unless Fiji received assurances that nuclear weapons were not aboard. A similar disclosure requirement had been adopted by the Fijian cabinet two years earlier, along with a ban on nuclear-powered ships, but the measures were not enforced. Mara said this oversight would now be corrected by rigid enforcement. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] his election jitters over the prospect of a tough fight at the polls in July probably prompted him to capitalize on what he read as the public's antinuclear mood. The Fijian press and the influential Pacific Conference of Churches, which is headquartered in Fiji, applauded Vanuatu's ban and condemned as "arrogant" the US nondisclosure policy. [REDACTED]

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Ratu Mara's current negative attitude toward the United States probably will be given an added push by the prospect of reduced sales of Fijian sugar. Under recently announced US sugar import quotas, Fiji will be limited to 19,600 tons this year, compared with its 1981 US sales of 39,000 tons. Fiji, which garners more than 75 percent of its export earnings from sugar, had massively expanded production in the mid-1970s in anticipation of a growing US market. [REDACTED]

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Table 2

South Pacific: Port Calls by US Warships

	1979	1980	1981
Australia	34 (1) ^a	49 (10) ^a	59 (13) ^a
New South Wales	12	6	13
Victoria	3	4	
South Australia	1	2	
Tasmania	2	3	
Western Australia	11	31	45
Queensland	4	2	1
Northern Territory	1	1	
New Zealand	13 (1) ^a	13 (1) ^a	10
Papua New Guinea	3	2	4
Fiji	10	2	
Solomon Islands		2 (1) ^a	
Tonga	1		
Western Samoa	2		
Vanuatu	2	1	1

^a Number of nuclear-powered ships. In Australia, all port visits of nuclear-powered ships were to Western Australia.

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Because of Fiji's influence in the region and the South Pacific nations' penchant for having consensus on major issues, there is a risk that other island states will follow Vanuatu and Fiji's lead. Papua New Guinea and the Solomons continue to permit port visits without asking about nuclear armaments, but they appear increasingly uncomfortable with the situation, as evidenced by an uncharacteristic slowness in responding to recent US requests. At the other end of the spectrum, Tonga has made clear its continued welcome to all US warships, perhaps in part to spite its large neighbor Fiji. Tonga recently underscored this position by hosting a nuclear-powered US cruiser.

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The Australians—whose navy is neither nuclear powered nor nuclear armed—have unintentionally undermined the US stand on disclosure by readily denying the presence of nuclear arms in their recent ship calls at islander ports. They are now trying to undo any damage by interceding with island governments on behalf of the United States, reminding them of the security benefits to the region of an unfettered US military presence. So far they have received polite hearings from the islanders but no promises to reconsider nuclear attitudes.

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**An Emotionally
Charged Issue**

However overdrawn, antinuclear sentiment in the area is genuinely felt and not easily modified. The islanders do not distinguish between nuclear testing and nuclear weapons, nuclear propulsion, or nuclear waste; rather, they usually condemn them all with the same vehemence they use in attacking French nuclear testing. [REDACTED]

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Strident opposition to French testing has kept the islanders at loggerheads with France for years. Expectations last year that the new Socialist government in France would end nuclear testing were dashed when President Mitterrand ordered the program resumed after only a one-week standdown. Indeed, Paris apparently accelerated its testing program, [REDACTED]

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The islanders are also united in opposing disposal of nuclear waste in their region. They resent outside powers' viewing the Pacific as a dumping ground for materials they would not dispose of closer to home. Three years ago the islands were unanimous in condemning a proposed nuclear storage site on one of three US-owned islands—Palmyra, Midway, or Wake. Concern waned after Washington did not pursue the project but has been fired anew by the US Navy's environmental study for disposing spent reactors from nuclear submarines. The islands have picked up strong support for their opposition to this idea from New Zealand and Australia. Reacting to the Navy study, a New Zealand official wryly suggested disposal in the Atlantic, and Australian officials emphasized their backing of the Pacific islanders' opposition to all nuclear dumping. The Papua New Guinean Foreign Minister's comment that no amount of scientific evidence could convince him of the safety of nuclear disposal typified regional reaction. The islanders similarly rejected a Japanese invitation to inspect domestic nuclear installations as a ploy to soften their opposition to Tokyo's dumping plans. [REDACTED]

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**The Australian and
New Zealand
Connection**

Although islander feelings on nuclear issues are self-generated, they are reinforced by strong antinuclear movements in New Zealand and Australia. Antinuclear sentiment is particularly widespread in New Zealand, where fear of leakage has been a hindrance to visits of US nuclear-powered warships. The former Labor government capitalized on public concern by banning port calls by US nuclear-powered warships. [REDACTED]

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Even the National Party government of Prime Minister Muldoon, a strong advocate of the US security alliance, feels constrained to deny port calls in election years because they invariably set off disruptive demonstrations. The postponed visit of a US nuclear-powered cruiser, the USS Truxtun, to head off the possibility of demonstrations during Vice President Bush's early May stay in Wellington is a good reflection of New Zealand sensitivities in this regard.² According to the US Embassy, antinuclear attitudes have recently surfaced even within the National Party, a clear manifestation of the breadth of antinuclear feeling in New Zealand.

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Concern in Australia over nuclear contamination and proliferation, although common, is not as deep seated as in New Zealand. Even so, Australia was unable for some years to export uranium because of the strength of radical labor antinuclear agitation. Canberra now permits uranium exports, subject to international safeguards against use in nuclear weapons. According to the Australian press, there remains considerable public concern over possible leakage from nuclear-powered ships. The decision to permit port calls is made at the state level in Australia, and the two most populous states—New South Wales and Victoria—do not allow nuclear-powered vessels.³ The prohibition by Victoria is a recent ruling of that state's new Labor government.

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Short-Term Outlook

With feelings honed by years of opposition to French nuclear testing, new islander concerns over nuclear weapons and nuclear propulsion will not be easy to reverse. Moreover, the nearness of nuclear test sites and proposed disposal locations gives the nuclear issue an immediacy that is not present elsewhere in the world and inhibits any dispassionate consideration of the issues. Ironically, the islanders' success to date in heading off a strong Soviet presence in the area also has worked against a more receptive attitude on their part. The island states have turned aside repeated Soviet

² The Truxtun visit took place from 25 to 29 May 1982. Although protests were not as extensive as during the ship's last visit in 1980, work stoppages did interrupt ferry service between New Zealand's two islands for 36 hours.

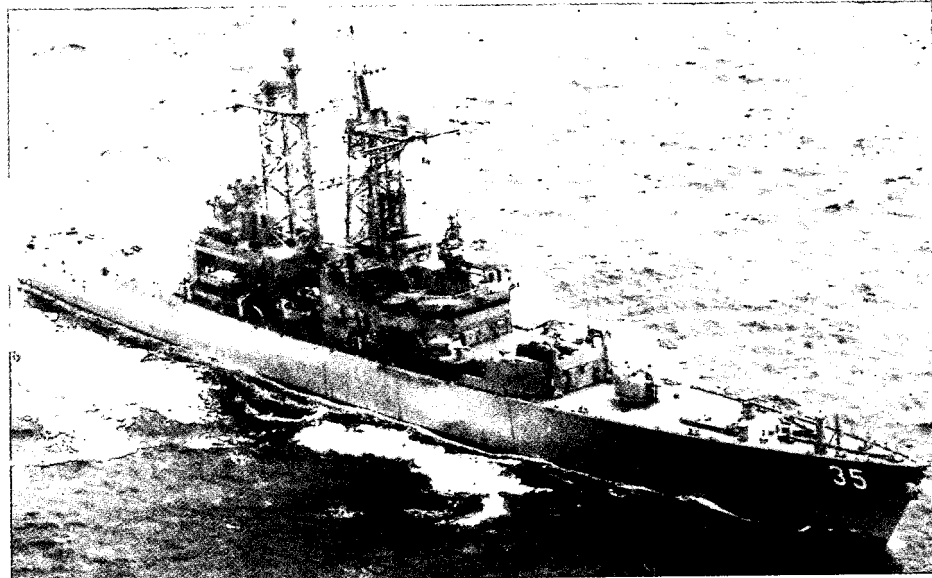
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³ Under the Australian federal system, state governments control access to their ports. When the US Government requests permission from the Australian Government for a nuclear-powered warship visit, Canberra consults with the appropriate state government before granting permission. Both levels of government must agree before such permission is granted, and Canberra cannot impose its will on the state government. Although officially Australian naval bases are federal territory, in practice—according to the Australian Foreign Ministry—the federal government would accede to the state government's wishes regarding nuclear-powered warship visits to these bases.

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USS Truxtun [redacted]

Jane's Fighting Ships
1974-75 ©

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requests to open embassies and to fish or to conduct oceanographic research in South Pacific waters, and are not impressed by the Soviet "threat."

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[redacted]

The nuclear issue will probably figure prominently at the South Pacific Forum meeting in August, which is the annual gathering of South Pacific heads of government. It would provide the occasion for other South Pacific states to embrace the antinuclear policies of Vanuatu and Fiji. Two possibilities are Papua New Guinea and the Solomons, where there is strong feeling within each government against the current practice of permitting US warship visits. [redacted]

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Australia and New Zealand, although Forum members, will be constrained in trying to mute nuclear rhetoric by their need to maintain a low profile in what the islanders regard as their special organization. In view of the islanders' touchiness about outside advice, the Australians and New Zealanders will have to be discreet in pointing out the inconsistency between a South Pacific desire for an ANZUS security connection and advocacy of nuclear policies that would inhibit US military activity. Efforts at quiet diplomacy by Canberra and Wellington are also likely to be diluted by islander awareness that there is a widespread sharing of their nuclear fears among the Australian and New Zealand public. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, emergence of a regional consensus at the Forum against nuclear arms and nuclear-powered ships does not seem to be in the offing. Any inclination by Fiji to proselytize its antinuclear policy will be restrained by its reluctance to be seen in league with erratic Vanuatu, and Tonga is almost certain to hold out against any policy of denying port calls.



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